DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 541 CS 217 429

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TITLE Common Ground: Speak with One Voice on Intellectual Freedom and the Defense of It.

INSTITUTION National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, IL.

PUB DATE 2000-00-00

NOTE 12p.

AVAILABLE FROM National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Tel: 1-800-369-6283 (Toll Free); Web site: http://www.ncte.org/positions/common.html.

PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Censorship; Elementary Secondary Education; *Intellectual Freedom; *Public Schools; *Student Rights

IDENTIFIERS First Amendment; *International Reading Association; *National Council of Teachers of English; United Nations

ABSTRACT

All students in public school classrooms have the right to materials and educational experiences that promote open inquiry, critical thinking, diversity in thought and expression, and respect for others. Denial or restriction of this right is an infringement of intellectual freedom. Because of their almost exactly similar positions against censorship, the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English have formed a joint task force on intellectual freedom. This position paper of these organizations aims to heighten sensitivity about censorship concerns and provide a resource for communities facing challenges to intellectual freedom. The paper first cites the First Amendment and Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights to reinforce its position. It then provides an action plan and strategies to adopt before a challenge arises and after a challenge has been made. It considers tactics both at the local level and at the state/provincial level, as well as at the national and international level. The paper offers a list of groups interested in fighting censorship and an extensive bibliography of resources. It also cites some situations that might affect teachers and censorship. (NKA)

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ED 452 541

Common Ground

The National Council of Teachers of English and The International Reading Association

Speak with One Voice on Intellectual Freedom and the Defense of It

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NCTE/IRA Joint Statement on Intellectual Freedom

All students in public school classrooms have the right to materials and educational experiences that promote open inquiry, critical thinking, diversity in thought and expression, and respect for others. Denial or restriction of this right is an infringement of intellectual freedom.

Official policy of the International Reading Association (IRA) supports "freedom of speech, thought, and inquiry as guaranteed by the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States," and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) "supports intellectual freedom at all educational levels." Because of these almost exactly similar positions against censorship, the two associations, both advocates of literacy education and concerned with the issues that affect it, have formed a joint task force on intellectual freedom. One of the many goals of the NCTE/IRA Task Force on Intellectual Freedom is the development of this document to heighten sensitivity about censorship concerns and provide a resource for communities facing challenges to intellectual freedom.

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of expression:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of people to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

So does Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions, without interference, and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Principles

The following principles of access, diversity, and fairness translate the ideal of the First Amendment into classroom reality:

1. The education community should actively support intellectual freedom within the United States and among all nations.

2. Intellectual freedom in education is sought through fostering democratic values, critical thinking in teaching and learning, open inquiry, and the exploration of diverse points of view.

3. Educational communities should prepare for challenges to intellectual freedom with clearly defined procedures for the selection and review of educational materials and methods.

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4. To preserve intellectual freedom in the classroom, educational communities, using professionally responsible criteria, should be free to select and review classroom curricula and materials that meet the needs of a diverse student population. Selection and revision of materials and methods does not necessarily mean endorsement or promotion; an educator's freedom to choose responsibly to meet student needs is a form of intellectual freedom.

What to do

Action Plan/Strategies

Local Level

As a matter of regular practice, and before a challenge arises:

Check to see if there are print and nonprint materials selection policies and procedures and complaint policies (including forms) on file. If there are no policies, participate in developing them and in having them adopted by the school board. Circulate policies frequently to faculty, administrators, and parents.

Prepare, seek, and collect rationales for the use of specific curricular materials and practices.

Discuss with immediate supervisors the selection of all class texts and nonprint media and the development of reading lists and nonprint media.

Stay in touch with district supervisory personnel on matters of curricular practices and materials selection.

Create a dialogue with the broader community in support of intellectual freedom to discuss the issues involved and to mobilize support in advance of challenges.

Find alternate choices for students who wish to "opt out" of an assignment.

Save selected written student responses to works assigned to illustrate the diversity of responses to literature.

Discuss with local book salespeople their company's current position on exclusion, abridgement, and adaptation in published texts, as well as in those in preparation. Integrity requires that publishers prominently note "abridgements."

Engage students in discussions about and activities related to intellectual freedom.

Establish a professional library that includes publications related to intellectual freedom in a special section of the media center or teachers' lounge.

Discuss intellectual freedom at faculty meetings and parent-teacher meetings.

If your system engages in collective bargaining, propose the inclusion of an intellectual freedom clause as a "working condition" of the next collective bargaining agreement.

Work with your local councils of NCTE and IRA and with your librarians to address issues of intellectual freedom and to develop local resources.

Stay informed about groups whose goal it is to remove books and other curricular materials from schools (e.g., Eagle Forum, Concerned Women of America, Focus on the Family, American Family Association, Citizens for Excellence in Education.)

Keep a file of reviews and rationales for use of specific instructional materials.

After a challenge has been made:

Try to resolve the challenge informally at the building level. Make an appointment to meet with the complainant to explain how and why the challenged materials were selected.

Be sure a third person is present at all meetings.

If the complainant wants to continue to challenge the material after this meeting, provide him or her with a request-for-review form.

If a completed request-for-review form is submitted, make sure the district policy for review is strictly adhered to.

Inform the community of the challenge and conduct the review process openly.

State/Provincial Level

Remember than many local tactics apply at the state/provincial level.

Join and work with your state/provincial affiliates of IRA and NCTE. Get the topic of "intellectual freedom" on programs and in resolutions.

Form a state coalition for intellectual freedom, including, for example, IRA, NCTE, American Library Association (ALA) affiliates, as well as artists' organizations, booksellers, video dealers, and American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) representatives.

Participate in state adoption procedures and encourage the inclusion of intellectual freedom criteria in state adoption policies. Have on file state textbook and materials adoption criteria.

Become acquainted with people in the state/provincial department of education office on professional practices.

Solicit information on materials selection and curricular practice from state supervisors in English, reading, elementary school, middle school, and high school.

Collect and make available pertinent literature from other organizations such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), National Association for Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and work with these organizations on initiatives for intellectual freedom.

Propose intellectual freedom as a topic for state meetings of IRA, NCTE, ALA, National School Boards Association (NSBA), or National PTA meetings.

Stay informed of new state or provincial legislation affecting intellectual freedom. Support intellectual freedom legislation, and work to have such legislation enacted.

National Level

Become familiar with national organizations that deal with intellectual freedom.

Gain information about resources that NCTE and IRA have available for dealing with issues of intellectual freedom.

Gain an understanding of teachers' and citizens' rights in matters of intellectual freedom.

Provide information and suggestions on the issue of intellectual freedom to organizations such as the U.S. Department of Education, Education Commission of the States (ECS), and National Governors' Association (NGA).

Encourage the inclusion at national conferences of programs dealing with intellectual freedom.

Join national and international organizations such as NCTE, IRA, ALA, and the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC).

International Level

Cooperate with international organizations that deal with issues of intellectual freedom [e.g., United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and PEN International].

Support international policies against censorship.

Encourage inclusion of intellectual freedom sessions at international conferences.

Work with organizations of teachers in other counties to promote intellectual freedom.

Promote statements of intellectual freedom as a basic human right.

Work with organizations in other countries to promote intellectual freedom.

Groups Interested in Fighting Censorship

American Association of School Administrators (AASA), 1901 North Moore Street, Arlington, VA 22209, 703/528-0700, Contact: Gary Marx

American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 1012 14th Street, NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005, 202/737-5900

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), 132 West 43rd Street, New York, NY 10036, 212/944-9800

American Library Association (ALA), Freedom to Read Foundation, 50 East Huron Street, Chicago, IL 60611,
312/280-4224 or 800/545-2433, ext. 4224, Contact: Anne Levinson

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), 1250 North Pitt Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-1403, 703/549-9110

Education Commission of the States (ECS), 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427, 303/299-3692

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), PO Box 95312, 2509 CH The Hague, Netherlands

International Reading Association (IRA), 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19711-8139, 302/731-1600, Contact: Wendy Russ

National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, 703/684-3345

National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), 1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091, 703/860-0200

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801, 217/328-3870, Contact: Millie Davis

National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), 2 West 64th Street, New York, NY 10023, 212/724-1500

National Governors' Association (NGA), Hall of States, 444 North Capitol Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001, 202/624-5300

People for the American Way, 200 M Street, NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20036, 202/467-2381, Contact: Mark Sedway

Student Press Law Center, 1735 Eye Street, NW, Suite 504, Washington, DC 20006, 202/466-5242

PEN American Center, 568 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, 212/334-1660

UNESCO, 7, Place de Fontenoy, 75700 Paris, France

U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20202, 202/708-5366

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Censorship Isn't a problem anymore, is it?

Do you know what the censors are saying...

"I hope I live to see the day when, as in the early days of our country, we won't have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over again and Christians will be running them.

The Reverend Jerry Falwell (Donna Hulsizer, Protecting the Freedom to Learn)

"Until textbooks are changed, there is no possibility that crime, violence, venereal disease, and abortion rates will decrease."

Mel and Norma Gabler (Donna Hulsizer, Protecting the Freedom to Learn)

"Modern public education is the most dangerous single force in a child's life: religiously, sexually, economically, patriotically, and physically."

The Reverend Tim LeHaye (Dave Marsh, 50 Ways to Fight Censorship)

Teachers aren't affected by censorship, are they?

Have you ever heard or said. . .

I'm afraid to use this book because some parents will object.

I've heard that film caused trouble before.

I read this book aloud to the class, but I changed some of the words.

Our drama group can't do that play; the language might offend someone.

I know my students want to talk about that issue. I don't dare let them.

Inviting this author to our school will just cause trouble.

I would love to order this book/tape/film for my school, but I won't even bother. The administration would never give me the money for it because they'll find something objectionable.

I never ask my kids to write responses to what they read. That's an invasion of their privacy.

My class doesn't visit that museum on field trips because of some nudity in the artwork there.

"The book...is an exquisite example of human genius. Where it flourishes, man flourishes. Where it withers, humanity withers. The book is strong. It can endure for a thousand years and more, but there exist those who would put out its eyes, blacken its words, reduce it to a grey heap of ashes, lock it in chains, and let generations live and die in darkness."

Harrison E. Salisbury, in a lecture at the Library of Congress, 1983

"No book is safe from the censors. What they fear is an open exchange of ideas. They're worried that once you slip onto the raft with Huck and Jim, or watch Henry Miller banging against the soft walls of the universe, or experience James Baldwin's Amen Corner, it may change you. And they're right."

Dave Marsh, 50 Ways to Fight Censorship

"School children are one of the largest captive reading audiences in the world today. Because of the high cost of textbook publishing, relatively small interest groups can influence the content of textbooks throughout the U.S. It has become a very politicized process."

Sherry Keith, author, Politics of Textbook Selection

"Schools should teach students how to think, not what to think. To study an idea is not necessarily to endorse an idea."

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"I would ask you to reconsider your decision for the sake of your students, the ideals of education and knowledge, and also the freedom of speech and thought. We shall not be protecting our youth if we swathe them in ignorance, nor shall we earn or deserve their respect, if we cannot place enough trust and faith in them to reason and respond on their own behalves."

George Braziller; publisher of the book 365 Days, in a letter to the chair of the Baileyville, Maine, school committee that had removed the book from the library.